

***“The Servants of the All-Compassionate”*: Building Communities
of Realization in a Global Civilization**

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...the servants of the All-Compassionate are those who walk upon the earth lightly/humbly. And when the ignorant address them (with hostility), they say: “Peace.” (Qur’an 25:63)

I have never forgotten the casual remark of a close spiritual teacher, many years ago, that “You [scholars of religious and historical studies] are archeologists working in cemeteries” (*Vous êtes des archéologues des cimetières*). The lasting memory of this passing observation—or reproach?—tellingly repeated in different words by other shaykhs and guides I’ve encountered over the years, no doubt reflects a widespread perception of the relative uselessness and motivations of most specialized scholars working in many different historical fields of scholarship. So in this year’s Danner lecture, rather than discussing some particular area of personal research that may only interest a few other specialists, I would like to turn to a broader subject of interest to a wider audience, including the many distinguished scholars working in related fields at this university. In other words, I would like to briefly explore some of the deeper human reasons, beyond the personal vagaries of historical curiosity and intellectual and artistic passion, for the recent, rapidly spreading worldwide contemporary interest in certain disciplines of classical Islamic thought and in their expressions in masterpieces of the Islamic humanities, far beyond their earlier cultural and religious contexts. And I should stress from the start that these observations are not intended as an argument for a particular conclusion or course of action, but instead simply as an invitation to look more closely around us, echoing the constantly repeated Qur’anic injunction to “*Travel through the earth and see-and-reflect...*”¹

It is always easier, in any age, to notice the public, often violent disintegration of a familiar civilization, than the slow creation and gradual coalescence of newer forms of cultural and spiritual community. And over the past forty years, scholars of my generation have in a way been remarkably privileged to observe—or rather, actually to live through—radical shifts in the particular roles and socio-cultural “location” of many traditions of classical Islamic thought, humanities, and spiritual practice. As a young student, like so many of my scholarly friends and

¹ See the discussion of these many related Qur’anic passages in our study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Futūhāt, The Reflective Heart* (Fons Vitae, 2005), pp. 13-18.

colleagues at the time, I was profoundly entranced by the initial encounter with civilizational traditions deeply rooted for many centuries in a multitude of highly diverse local cultures and creative communities, which I eagerly sought out and explored—above all through unforgettable “meetings with remarkable souls”—from Morocco to Afghanistan, and eventually on to Malaysia and Indonesia. But I also quickly discovered—in the midst of the tumultuous sequence of coups, disastrous revolutions, invasions, and civil wars which so often seemed to follow regularly in my footsteps—a more pervasive, world-wide process in which the pastoral-agrarian foundations and long-established local contexts of those spiritual practices and fascinating artistic and intellectual disciplines were shattered and destroyed in a multitude of obvious and more subtle ways.²

One of the strangely unexpected eventual consequences of those wider historical transformations is the way that in more recent years many of the most promising young people from so many of those same countries and cultures now eagerly strive to come study with scholars of my generation in Western universities; or if they are fortunately able to pursue those classical studies freely at home, are often obliged to do so using translations in the strange new global Islamic lingua franca of English—a medium of discourse suddenly as pervasive and unavoidable, in this digital age, as with the rapid spread of Persian and Persianate Islamic culture following the Mongol invasions. Or to capture more of the poignant individual human dramas underlying this situation, we now take for granted this age when—to borrow the memorable imagery of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*—entire disciplines (artistic, intellectual and spiritual) of extraordinary human value, which had developed and evolved over centuries, are effectively reduced, in their living and creative form, to a relative handful of “living books”: to

² The most dramatic initial encounters with this destructive transformation, which I have never forgotten, were witnessing the introduction of battery-powered tape players (along with Bollywood music) into the non-electrified culture of Herat, resulting in the disappearance, within the space of a few years, of a profoundly rooted local musical culture in which everyone one encountered seemed to be singing, reciting poetry and *dhikr*, or playing their own personal instrument. And likewise witnessing the disastrous impact, during my first summer studying in Morocco, of the sudden introduction of cheap plastic suitcases and water-pitchers, replacing again almost overnight the beautifully hand-carved wooden suitcases (which were quickly burned as cooking fuel) and locally made pewter ewers—and rapidly impoverishing, in the process, those local craftsmen and artisans who had for generations depended on their production (and whose lives were traditionally deeply intertwined with local spiritual orders and institutions of religious learning).

unique civilizational resources often living, working and creating in relative solitude (as modern-day *muhājirūn*) in more supportive Western artistic centers and universities, such as here in Bloomington.

Against that eventful historical backdrop, it is certainly easy—at least for an outside observer—to view a concern with the threatened classical traditions of Islamic thought and humanities as a kind of archeological obsession or a romantic fascination with lost worlds. Indeed my own undergraduate university training in “Civilizational Studies” at the University of Chicago was an ongoing encounter with an unforgettable procession of famous, and profoundly nostalgic, refugees from the recently self-destroyed civilizations of Eastern and Western Europe—an encounter that often echoed my own childhood obsession with family myths of our own lost Cherokee heritage. And most of my adult life since then has been involved with the establishment of a series of remarkable academic centers (first in Iran, then in Paris, London, and Exeter, or even now at Boston College), funded by far-sighted philanthropists, that have been devoted to finding ways of preserving, restoring, or somehow re-creating key civilizational dimensions of the Islamic heritage—in philosophy, music, literature, culture, theology and politics—under radically challenging new historical circumstances. So here, rather than looking backward (as we historians of course naturally do professionally), I would like to turn to look forward and immediately around us, at some of the unexpected or taken-for-granted ways that a new and necessarily global civilization may be emerging from the very visible “ruins” of Islamic and many other earlier civilizations, under circumstances not that different from much earlier periods of unexpected creative coalescence, particularly in the centuries immediately following the Mongol invasions. In other words, my focus in this brief discussion is not on the particular traditions and disciplines we teach as such, but instead on considering the deeper motives, prospects, and constructive potential of that network of younger students, now located all over the world, who continue to study, read, and creatively pursue those traditions.

THE PATHWAYS OF REALIZATION (*tahqīq*):

Given the limits of this essay, I have chosen to discuss here the wide range of Islamic intellectual, spiritual and artistic traditions that have long been my focus of teaching and research in terms of what they all have in common: their wider, shared methodological approach of spiritual reflection and “realization” or “actualization”—of what their more philosophical proponents usually called *tahqīq* (or *tahaqquq*), the unique active interplay of spiritual

attentiveness, intelligent reflection, and illuminating inspiration characterizing each individual *muhaqqiq*. For the universal applicability and potential appeal of that distinctive perspective is almost immediately recognizable today by people from all the world's cultures and all walks of life, and because this approach provides such an obvious irenic connection between different religions and cultures. The metaphysical backdrop of that process of realization is aptly summarized in one of the Qur'anic verses most often alluded to by the pioneering representatives of this wider tradition: ... *We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls, so that it becomes clear to them that He [Hū, the divine Essence] is the Real (al-Haqq).* (41:53)

For our purposes here, we can start with this far-reaching description of the essence and aim of the human state, centering on the awareness of the Heart (*qalb al-insan*) as the constantly evolving mirror of the "Real". That is, as the ongoing intersection of the divine Self-revelation, through all the infinite forms of creation, with our own ever-deepening discovery of the Source and meaning of those Signs. Or to use Ibn 'Arabi's own technical vocabulary, each person's life can be described in terms of a specific inner relationship of sensitivity and responsiveness to those particular divine qualities or "Names" that eventually come to define each human being's uniquely individual reality. Each soul, through its lifelong movement of devoted service (*'ibāda*) to the sustaining "Lord" (*rabb*) constituted by its particular guiding set of divine Names, gradually comes to follow a certain recognizable spiritual trajectory, or "way of proceeding" (*madhhab*) toward its destined realization.

This process of naturally unfolding spiritual realization or *tahqīq*—which outwardly seems to start at different times and to proceed at very different paces—normally begins with the awakening of a mysteriously compelling sense of curiosity or mystery. Then that initial wonder draws us toward the distinctive "Signs" or manifestations of certain particular dimensions of the Real (*al-Haqq*). Eventually, given sufficient ongoing attention to those guiding Signs and the gradual discovery of their deeper significance in life, that initial curiosity begins to develop into a compelling striving for understanding and proper responsiveness to those Signs. And over time, that striving gives rise to heightened discipline and awareness in relation to all the manifestations and inherent obligations of that particular divine quality. Finally, at the culminating stage of this process, the *muhaqqiq* (the person who has fully realized the expressions of this specific divine reality) naturally moves on toward the wider creative expression of that devotion. This last stage may involve the development of new means of

teaching and artistic communication about these Names and Signs; or it may find expression in the formation of new communities of fellow-seekers which gradually coalesce around this shared spiritual task of devotion, discovery, understanding, and creative response.

In reality, as Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings constantly remind us, the particular constellation of divine Names and qualities realized within each individual’s lifetime are necessarily complex, particular, and often seriously shifting in their inner or outer manifestations. For the purposes of this exposition, we must sharply simplify that phenomenological perspective in order to focus on three very broad sets of those divine “servants,” three recurrent groups whose distinctive modes of realization and service are quite visible “*wherever you-all turn...*” (2:117).

To begin with, our purpose in singling out these three groups of *muhaqqiqūn* or “realizers” is simply to highlight the fact that such souls are active and present all around us, whatever the particular cultures and religions they may happen to identify as their own. Secondly, the restriction of our consideration today to these three particular broad categories of “servants” or realizers is admittedly somewhat arbitrary. Since it is always a good idea to speak publicly about what one knows best, my excuse for this artificially limited focus in this essay—having spent most of my adult life in universities in many countries—is that these three broad categories of *muhaqqiqūn* are the ones I have had the best opportunity to know and observe at all life-stages, both in real life and in the various historical contexts of my scholarly research. And since those universities themselves were often initially created in order to nurture and support the distinctive tasks of spiritual realization, they still do provide a helpful locale for observing the unfolding, lifelong development of individual vocations within each of these three very broad forms of realization. Finally, the particular identifying tags given to each of these three extensive groups here are simply my own suggestive approximations for the purposes of this essay—inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi’s language and perspectives, but certainly not quoted from him.

SERVANTS OF THE ALL-WISE (*‘ibād al-Hakīm*):

Following the order of the “Signs” mentioned in our initial Qur’anic verse (41:53), we may begin with those people especially devoted to deciphering the meanings of some of the particular divine Signs of God’s Wisdom and Order “*on the horizons*”. That is to say, whose efforts of realization are dedicated to deepening their appreciation of those infinite divine Signs within some very limited domain of the natural or social worlds. Now what is immediately

obvious when we consider the relative attention and collective human resources devoted to this vast realm of the “external” divine Signs, comparing our own age with that of Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi, for example, is a dramatic civilizational shift in both emphasis and organization. For in fact vigorously active and worldwide communities of accomplished *muhaqqiqūn* do exist today, focusing on virtually every conceivable area of those manifold physical and socio-historical “horizons.” And these specialized seekers, in most of those scientific domains, now benefit from complex and well-developed (if historically extremely recent) systems of support, initiation, training and discipline that are open to those with the necessary vocations. As a result, the disciplined dedication of all these individuals devoted to realizing some highly specialized manifestation of this divine Name (*al-Hakīm*: “the All-Wise” Orderer of creation) is something that by now people everywhere tend to take almost for granted. Precisely as so many people across the Islamic world for centuries once took for granted the remarkable spiritual accomplishments, explorations and mediation of the “Friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) and all those other divine servants particularly devoted to the deciphering the Signs of the Real “*in their souls*”.

At a deeper level, of course, Ibn ‘Arabi would be the first to remind us that such single-minded devotion to realizing only one (or even any other partial set) of the divine Names is a kind of unintentional, but still dangerously restrictive “idolatry”—however understandable such a restriction of our focused devotion and realization might be, given the limited capacities and circumstances within which we all are obliged to work. Yet that sort of narrow restriction of one’s field of realization poses a profound spiritual challenge which is shared by exclusivist devotees of every divine Name, and which surely also has its own providential purposes and underpinnings.

SERVANTS OF THE SUBTLY-GRACIOUS (*‘ibād al-Latīf*):

Simply for the purposes of this essay, we may speak here of the “servants of the Subtly-Gracious” as all those whose lives are particularly dedicated to deciphering and deepening our understanding of the presence and meaning of the divine Signs “*in their souls*” (41:53 again). This is the immense domain of spiritual realities in which Ibn ‘Arabi’s extraordinarily prolific writings, drawing on so many earlier traditions of spiritual research and accomplishment, still provide one of the most extensive and inclusive “phenomenologies of the spirit” ever produced. Because of the intimacy and inherent individuality of these divine Signs “in the souls,” the

practical pursuit of the processes of realization relating to the Spirit has often been restricted to the unrecorded, highly individualized personal relations between spiritual guides and their students, to all the intricacies and mysteries of “spiritual companionship” (*suhba*). The remarkable worldwide interest in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings today, of course, is made possible precisely by their thoroughgoing exception to that predominantly oral tradition, since they provide such richly detailed and anecdotally revealing accounts of virtually every stage and dimension of the spiritual Path.

For Ibn ‘Arabi’s own unique writings continue to offer—like the Qur’an, hadith and teachings of the *awliyā*’ that are their constant inspiration—a remarkable treasury of practical, doctrinal, and pedagogical tools and reminders of the intrinsic human universality of the Signs of the Real “in their souls”. Indeed it was exactly this vividly demonstrated, directly verifiable appeal to the human accessibility of the Real (*al-Haqq*) which so quickly made his works the indispensable companion for the wider processes of creative innovation and localized cultural adaptation of spiritual teaching that accompanied the rapid spread of Islam throughout Asia, as a world religion and as a remarkably diverse and inclusive civilization in the centuries immediately following the Mongol invasions. In fact, as we have often pointed out in other studies, it is that same characteristic approach of practically and intellectually rigorous spiritual realization—combining careful inner attentiveness and corresponding intellectual apprehension—which underlies the recently expanding worldwide appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings and insights. For the very diverse audiences who have turned to his works in recent years—psychologists and spiritual practitioners, artist-creators in every medium, theologians, philosophers of religion, and socio-political educators and reformers—are precisely the contemporary equivalents of his wide spectrum of Muslim audiences and influential creative interpreters in earlier centuries.

This phenomenon is hardly surprising. For today—just as was happening throughout the Muslim world amidst the turmoil of the 13th/7th century—we live in a world where both the expression and the perception of this realm of the divine “Signs in the souls” are being rapidly transformed by at least three new globalizing conditions for spiritual life. What is perhaps most striking about these three interrelated recent transformations in the ambient conditions for spiritual realization is the way that these developments are all already so omnipresent. Indeed these particular factors have already become so relatively “invisible” and taken for granted by

those young people who have grown up among them, that they seem new and surprising only to those of us old enough to remember a very different world much more sharply divided into relatively separate and distinct religious traditions and civilizations.

- (a) The first of those conditions, particularly influencing the actual symbolic forms and expressions of individual spiritual life everywhere today, is the eclectic spreading of a common, broadly dispersed set of popular symbolic repertoires originally drawn from a host of previously separate cultural traditions. In other words, we witness everywhere around us the emergence of a host of new, often globally shared symbolic and mythological languages. The formation of this shared worldwide symbolic culture can be seen and illustrated in detail, for example, at the level of children’s stories, cartoons and fables; of music, cinema and video games; of advertising and other forms of mass communication; and of new shared ethical and political ideals, such as issues involving the planetary environment, sustainability, human (including women’s) rights, and “green” consciousness. To a great extent, of course, the divine “Signs in the souls” in this period are necessarily encountered and expressed—as always—in the guise of such widely shared symbols and aspirations drawn directly from our shared effective (and affective) human life-worlds. As one quickly discovers in teaching students and young people all around the world today, the operative symbols that they naturally use to speak of their spiritual and ethical lives—whether consciously, or in the more intimate realms of dreams and spirituality—tend to be drawn from this same, increasingly worldwide repertoire of widely shared popular symbolism, rather than from the earlier prevalent symbolic frameworks of religious scriptures and traditions, or more localized folkloric and poetic cultures.
- (b) The second new worldwide condition transforming this domain of spiritual intelligence and realization is the wide popular awareness—perhaps only implicit at the mass level, but readily filled out by any youngster with a modicum of curiosity—of the radical similarities between the essential spiritual and devotional practices across what were previously taken to be quite separate religious and devotional traditions (e.g., forms of prayer, pilgrimage, retreat, fasting, vigil, service, vows, offerings, sacrifice, individual spiritual guidance, mediation, and so

on). In souls with a spiritual vocation and sufficient intellectual curiosity, it is difficult to separate this particular globalized awareness at the level of spiritual practices from further questioning about other claims (ethical, doctrinal, theological, eschatological, and so on) that were also once assumed to sharply distinguish different historical religious traditions.

- (c) The third new factor providing a shared worldwide context for spiritual life—at least in urban, cosmopolitan and digitally-connected settings—is the widespread situation of almost immediate personal access to and choices among a highly diverse spectrum of alternative spiritual tools, disciplines, and forms of guidance. Unlike past historical circumstances, this very broad range of options for spiritual guidance and practice is today often quite distinct from those possibilities initially provided by each individual’s prior familial background or locally inherited cultural and religious adherence. Instead, these available alternative therapeutic possibilities are potentially drawn from a wide range of very different religious and cultural choices, including eclectic combinations (like the “12-Step” programs) and a never-ending succession of self-proclaimed new innovations. (A few hours searching the internet, almost anywhere in the world today, will amply illustrate the range of phenomena we are speaking of here.) And once again, this broadly shared spectrum of potential spiritual resources is often connected with, or expressed in a language tied to, widely shared, visibly universal human issues of “holistic health” or similar global environmental, ethical and political concerns.

While it is certainly far too early to discern all of the practical implications (whether social, cultural, religious and ethico-political) and the eventual longer-term results of these three interrelated and still very recent worldwide transformations, one very practical consequence is already quite evident. Each person interested in exploring and appropriately responding to the necessarily individual divine “Signs in their souls” is now obliged to seek out “translators” who are not only qualified and capable of connecting those Signs to their underlying Reality and Source; but who are also—and here is what is really new—able to translate as well across and between the spiritual experiences and practices of disparate individuals from dramatically different religious and cultural backgrounds. (At the same time, as we have just noted, the traditional, previously inherited local cultural resources for making those essential interpretive

connections are no longer automatically or effectively accessible.) Thus the philosophical breadth, flexibility, inclusivity and proven effectiveness of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, together with his explicitly universal guiding focus on all the dimensions of human spiritual realization (*tahqīq*)—i.e., as a kind of potential “universal Translator”³—mean that many wider audiences living in these new historical circumstances are increasingly likely to turn their attention to his works and those of other exemplary *muhaqqiqūn*, especially as the gradual process of their translation and contextualization continues to make his teachings and perspectives more widely accessible, far beyond their original audience of Muslim scholars deeply learned in the Arabic disciplines of the traditional religious and philosophical sciences.

Finally, we may also note the ongoing phenomena of convergence, within this immense domain of spiritual realization, between the approaches of those devoted to and formed by more traditional forms of spiritual practice (from different religious traditions), on the one hand; and the corresponding interests of disparate groups of researchers and *muhaqqiqūn* whose specialized inquiries naturally bring them to consider those spiritual Signs from the perspective of their own guiding concerns with health, healing, ecology, and related wider social concerns: psychologists, educators, biologists, medical researchers, neuroscientists, healers, ethicists, environmental activists and many others. As we have suggested in other venues, one way of speaking of that visibly emerging interface of convergence across these separate practical domains—if certainly more as a hoped-for ideal, than an as yet actualized reality—is in terms of an inclusive “*science of spirituality*”: as a spiritual phenomenology coherent with the relevant scientific perspectives and explanations, while somehow adequate and sufficiently open to the full human range of metaphysical realities and diverse individual experiences of the spiritual world. Here again, we can see that a philosopher like Mulla Sadra, within the limitations and particular cultural concerns of his own era, to a great extent already anticipated the need for such a science of spirituality—and that he also turned repeatedly to Ibn ‘Arabi for much of his guiding inspiration.

³ A function that practically corresponds to his mysterious self-portrayal of the trans-historical role as what he alludes to as the “Seal of (universal) Sainthood” (*khatm al-awliyā*): see the accessible and comprehensive discussion of this notoriously controversial theme in M. Chodkiewicz’ classic *The Seal of the Saints: Prophecy and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

SERVANTS OF THE BEAUTIFUL (*'ibâd al-Jamîl*)

In one of the most widespread and influential Prophetic hadith, the famous “Hadith of Gabriel,” the process of “recognizing-and-doing what is beautiful-and-good” (*ih̥sān*) is presented as the ultimate purpose of human existence and as the culminating practical expression of the foundations of spiritual devotion and faith shared by all divine revelations. In response to Gabriel’s question there about the meaning of *ih̥sān*, the Prophet then responds that it is “to worship-and-serve God *as though you see Him*; and if you do not see Him, still He sees you.”⁴ This profoundly complex hadith is a salutary reminder, in the context of this essay, that the effective bridging between the divine Signs encountered and discovered “on the horizons” and those experienced “in the souls”—and in the translation of both kinds of Signs back to their Source and intended meaning in the Real/*al-Haqq*—is inseparable from that love which flows from our discovery and response to the manifold dimensions of divine Beauty inherent in all creation. Or in the words of another equally familiar tradition: “He is Beautiful, and He loves beauty.”

If we have included in our discussion here this third, immensely varied group of “realizers” (*muhaqqiqūn*), it is because, whether we look at the world around us today or in the earlier formative periods of Islamic civilization, it is precisely these *muhsinūn* and “servants of the Beautiful” (*al-Jamîl*) whose creative acts of beauty actually help to awaken in most people—and then continue to nourish and to sustain—that love, wonder, and marveling reflection on God’s infinitely diverse Signs which mark the beginning and each successive stage of the spiritual journey. Such artists are among the most visible of those manifold “instruments of God’s Lovingmercy” (*al-rāhimūn*) who—to adapt Rumi’s repeated formula—open up for each of us that “Real-seeing eye” (*cheshm-i Haqq-bīn*: the Qur’anic *basīra*) which remains our constant companion on each of these particular lifelong pathways of devotion and transformation. If we need any reminding of their indispensable role, it was not the greatest Muslim philosophers and theologians who actually created the astonishingly diverse and innovative Islamic humanities that so rapidly spread throughout Asia following the Mongol devastations, but rather creative figures (albeit themselves often remarkably learned scholars) like Rumi, ‘Iraqi, Hafiz, Jami, Hamzeh Fansuri, and the host of other poetic and musical

⁴ Or in another possible reading of the same Arabic phrase: “and if ‘you’ are not, you *do* see Him; and He sees you.” (Each spiritual path lies between those two readings.)

interpreters whose popularly appealing works of art and lastingly influential creations actually sowed the seeds of that expanding Islamic civilization and world religion.

“THE SERVANTS OF THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE” (*‘ibād al-Rahmān*):

In the vast majority of cases, there is still a great distance separating each of these relatively common pathways of realization and apprehension of the divine Signs from the state of those rare and mysterious “servants of the All-Compassionate” evoked in the Qur’anic phrase of our title, who are themselves, in so many pervasive ways, among the deepest and most profoundly influential of the “Signs of God.” Indeed these rare vehicles of divine Compassion, if we may judge by the longer description of them at this sole passage in the Qur’an (25:63-76) and other related indications in the hadith, are virtually identical with those divinely missioned “Friends” and “purely devoted Servants” of God whose unique spiritual states, qualities and indispensable providential functions are described more frequently throughout the Qur’an. So if we have placed these special figures in the title and epigraph of this discussion, it is because of the two special qualities mentioned at the very beginning of their Qur’anic description, attributes which are clearly shared to some extent with those much larger groups of “realizers” who follow the varied pathways of realization with regard to any of the Signs of the Real (whether “on the horizons” or “in their souls”). The first of these distinctive spiritual qualities is their deep inner humility and self-effacement, since they are so constantly aware of Who actually bestows the illuminated awareness of the Source and specific meaning of each divine Sign. The second of those shared qualities is their inner equilibrium and knowing self-possession, manifested in their remarkable refusal, even in the face of direct provocation and hostility, to fall into the natural egoistic pitfalls of disputation and polemics, or worse. Instead, they simply point to that ineffable divine Peace (*salām*) which always flows from the inspired understanding and proper response to each of life’s ongoing divine lessons.

CONCLUDING INDICATIONS (*tanbîhât*): **BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF REALIZATION**

Keeping in mind these last two essential qualities of all true servants of the Real, we may conclude by noting a few other key qualities and potentials of all these *muhaqqiqûn* and their collective “pathways” (*madhāhib*), wherever they may be found. To begin with, there is a powerful inner affinity between all the “servants” of each divine Name, a spiritual connection of purpose and perspective, which potentially unites those devotees across all the usual boundaries of cultures, languages and ethnicities—perhaps even of time and space.

Thus the process of realization, in each of these settings, naturally tends to bring together those who are following these different pathways in some sort of spontaneously cooperating, mutually supportive communities, whether informal or more institutionalized, and whether at a local level or across much greater distances. Today that natural process of coalescence and cooperation in realization may be most obviously visible, all across the world, in some of the natural and human/social sciences. But in the past it happened at least as suddenly and pervasively, after the 13th/7th century, in a very different domain of realization. There we witness the rapid emergence, across most of Asia and Africa, of a vast range of extraordinarily diverse Sufi paths (*tariqas*), each with its own distinctive, locally adapted devotional emphases, practical methodologies, and social contexts and manifestations. And simultaneously, we are struck by the even more pervasive development, everywhere throughout that period, of deeply popular religious rituals and localized institutions of devotion (shrines, festivals, and rites of pilgrimage, or *ziyāra*) centering on the awareness of the transforming spiritual presence, support and guidance of all the “Friends of God” (the *awliyā’ Allah*).

Secondly, cooperation leads toward communion. In other words, the collaboration and mutual support needed to successfully pursue these different pathways of realization—whatever their particular focus and initial starting point in each case—already presupposes a deeply shared purpose and vision. And that shared process of inquiry necessarily culminates in the discovery of a common constructive basis of understanding, in a shared experience of the Real (*wujūd al-Haqq*). For that shared revelatory experience of Being (Arabic *wujūd*: which literally means “finding”, as well as experiencing the ecstatic presence of the Real), in every domain and circumstance, is a grace radically different from the familiar outward socio-political processes of argument, persuasion, agreement or coercion.

Thirdly, communion leads toward communication. As each of the master *muhaqqiqūn* constantly remind their readers and students, the actual experience of the Real, in every domain, is memorably transforming and profoundly enlivening. It cries out to be shared. There are dozens of pertinent Qur’anic verses about this, but perhaps the simplest and most inclusive—and most frequently cited—reminder of this metaphysical imperative is the remarkable divine Saying: “I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. Therefore I created creation/people (*al-khalq*), so that I might be known.” For “communication,” within this context of realization,

has the very specific sense of actually reminding, showing or revealing the particular “face” of the Real that is in question.

Finally, effective spiritual communication requires creative imagination. And that creativity, in reality, has its own very practical pre-conditions of effective individual freedom, experimentation, spontaneity, and innovation, in the fundamental human rights which are the essential foundations of all true “religion of the Real” (*dīn al-Haqq*). Indeed the irreducible uniqueness and inherent value of every individual soul and its own unique divine “Signs” is at the very heart of the process of realization, in all its endless forms. So it is surely no accident that those particular spiritual and political pre-conditions for the pathways of realization were so constantly highlighted in the distinctive understanding of revelation, prophecy and sainthood elaborated by Ibn ‘Arabi and by the long tradition of his later interpreters who developed and creatively communicated those perspectives throughout the Islamic world.

This last set of imperatives also helps to account for the determinant role in the elaboration of Islamic civilization at all times—including its wider human contributions in our day—of the illuminating acts of beauty and beneficence (*ihsān*) of all the “servants of the Beautiful” and all the *rāhimūn*. For nothing could be more poignantly free and open-ended—or more profoundly and unavoidably, personally challenging—than the simple phrase “as though” in the Prophet’s own explanation of *ihsān* as the culminating expression of all truly divine religion: “to worship/serve God *as though* you see Him....”